

Review of *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery* by Allison Page (University of Minnesota Press)

by Michael L. Thomas | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Book Reviews

ABSTRACT In *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery*, Allison Page interrogates how media culture from the 1960s to the present has mobilized the legacy of slavery for affective governance, or “the production and management of affect and emotion to align with governing rationalities” (6). Throughout the book, Page’s analysis succeeds in providing a rich mapping of the converging interests of state actors, media producers, educational organizations, and other stakeholders as they narrate their own desire to manage emotions in the wake of the civil rights movement and to maintain white supremacist order.

KEYWORDS media, affect, slavery, racialization, white supremacy, anti-radicalism

Media and the Affective Life of Slavery. By Allison Page. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 196 pp. (digital). ISBN 978-1-5179-1040-2. \$26 (paperback).

In *Media and the Affective Life of Slavery*, Allison Page interrogates how media culture from the 1960s to the present has mobilized the legacy of slavery for affective governance, or “the production and management of affect and emotion to align with governing rationalities” (6). On Page’s account, “the shift to official antiracism in the wake of World War II and the civil rights movement(s) required a modification in subject and racial formation” that “reveal[s] whiteness’s adaptive maneuvers to contain antiracist activism threatening the dominance of white supremacy” (4). Page traces these maneuvers through a historical exploration of the documentary, the miniseries, educational video games, and digital platforms as sites at which “media and the visual—alongside policy, political discourse, consumer culture, and curricula—provide templates for racial subjectivity through producing and disciplining emotion” (3). The book is divided into four chapters, two of which map the forms of affective governance that emerged in televised media from the 1960s and 70s, and two of which trace the inheritance of these forms in contemporary digital media. Each of these chapters provides a rich structural account of the integration of state, media, and educational architecture in the drive towards generating a popular

discourse and corresponding emotional framework to contain forces aimed at radical social change.

In chapter 1, "The Restless Black Peril," Page argues that documentaries such as 1968's *Of Black America* inaugurated a period of racial formation grounded in techniques of "emotional management" (19–20) through a "discourse of sobriety" (21) that presented white objectivity as a solution to pathological Black rage. In this framework, the legacy of slavery is deployed to frame a heritage of "Black anger," stoking fears of insurrection and unrest (37) as they simultaneously attempt to present an image of Black people as victimized, though the victimizer is never named. The crucial elements of this chapter are the documented evidence of corporate and state interest in the production of these documentaries as a strategy of profiting from racial difference by shifting the terms of the debate in ways that align with reformist politics and the "culture of poverty" thesis that dominated racial discourse of the time.

Chapter 2, "Feeling Slavery: *Roots* and the Pedagogies of Emotion," extends this analysis of state and corporate mobilization of emotion into education. It also highlights a shift from the *policing* of emotion to the *production* of forms of emotion that reconfigure Blackness and whiteness in line with liberal multicultural politics. Page's analysis in this chapter, however, strays from the television miniseries *Roots* to a concern with its framing in classrooms by the National Education Association, school boards, and media companies invested in *Roots* as a profitable tool for cultural development through its *affective impact* (70). In teaching materials, for example, Page shows that teachers are prompted to focus on Black (and white) students' feelings of shame or pride in their heritage rather than addressing the economic and political legacies of slavery in the 1970s, including increasing levels of Black poverty and segregation. Understanding one's heritage and taking pride in one's survival, argues Page, became a proxy for political action.

The final two chapters move from television to the digital realm and provide the book's strongest analysis. Page's rich description of digital platforms draws out how game mechanics encourage the practice of neoliberal agency and how web platforms can be mobilized to present conscious consumerism as a form of radical action. Chapter 3 presents *Flight to Freedom*, an interactive video game in which students are asked to "immerse" themselves (80) in the experience of an enslaved person through a series of "small quotidian choices" that sanitize the history of violence and precarity experienced (99). Page's analysis of *Freedom* is some of the strongest of the book, as she maps how the game frames agency in terms of compromised resistance and personal responsibility. This framing focuses on agency as an end rather than a starting point for a historical understanding of the conditions of slavery that would challenge the idea of docile Black subjects.

Chapter 4 turns to the website "Slavery Footprint," to trace how affective governance gives way to algorithmic governance, which Page defines as "the "capture, co-ordination and capitalization of data" to manage and govern populations by automated systems that "[regulate] the flows of [our] data and information" (103). Here, data plays the role of the expert, as in the case of the documentary form, providing a "color blind" basis to equate twenty-first-century slavery with chattel slavery and to present data as the solution that would reform corporate practices. Users are asked to participate in the site by demanding companies learn where their products are made and by whom so that they change their productive habits. The site thus aligns the consumer with the corporation as white subjects who, freed of their ignorance, can make ethical decisions, "leav[ing] unexamined the ways that racial capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and imperialism render certain populations 'vulnerable' to poverty, crime, discrimination, and even the effects of climate change" (119). Page explains, "Exploitation is relegated to the realm of 'forced' labor; instead of viewing exploitation as foundational for capitalism" (119). On the level of affect, feeling is funneled through the objectivity of data and one relieves their guilt through the colonial impulse of having "saved" a racialized other (107–8).

Throughout the book, Page's analysis succeeds in providing a rich mapping of the converging interests of state actors, media producers, educational organizations, and other stakeholders as they narrate their own desire to manage emotions in the wake of the civil rights movement and to maintain white supremacist order. At the same time, Page's theorizations of whiteness often presume the success of the racial project conducted by the media. For example, her description of Stokely Carmichael's appearance in "Black Power, White Backlash" offers clear framing in terms of a white liberal gaze, but lacks evidence from reviews or commentary that would show that this rendering translated to audiences of the time. In addition, we often lack detail on how media objects themselves introduce the affective structures that Page identifies. In the *Roots* chapter, for example, there is a rich description of the function of melodrama and the miniseries as a genre, but there are few examples from *Roots* itself beyond a brief overview in the opening of the chapter of its reframing of Black freedom. However, Page's broad mapping of the media landscape provides an important guide for tracing the counterrevolutionary politics undertaken by media, educational authorities, and the state, which future work in media studies can continue to model.

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